



Contrastive analysis of some errors committed by second language Learners of English at the English department, faculty of education, Sirte University

Ahmed Mohamed Gaddafi

faculty of education, English Department, Sirte University

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Abbreviations: L1- First language
L2- Second language

ABSTRACT

The main concern of this paper is to focus on the errors committed by second language learners of English at the English department faculty of education. The study is of a descriptive nature. The errors located are classified and then described in order to know the reasons behind them. The approach adopted in this research paper is a contrastive approach. The results of analysis gave a clue about the strategies adopted by Learners when confronted with a writing task. Analyzing the errors located is of vital importance for syllabus and material designers as well as classroom teachers and contributes substantially in improving language learning and teaching processes.

التحليل المقارن لبعض الأخطاء التي يرتكبها متعلمو اللغة الثانية بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية جامعة سرت

احمد محمد قدافي

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الاداب و العلوم زمز ، جامعة سرت، ليبيا

الكلمات المفتاحية:

اللغة البنية
أخطاء التحويل
التحليل المقارن
النظام اللغوي
الكفاءة اللغوية
أخطاء الأداء
المفاهيم الخاطئة
التعيم المفرط

الملخص

الدراسة ذات طبيعة وصفية. يتم من خلالها تصنيف الأخطاء الموجودة ثم وصفها لمعرفة الأسباب الكامنة وراءها. النهج المتبعة في هذه الورقة البحثية هو النهج التباعي. أعطت نتائج التحليل فكرة عن الاستراتيجيات التي اعتمدتها المتعلمون عند مواجهة مهمة الكتابة. يعد تحليل الأخطاء الموجودة أمراً ذا أهمية حيوية لصصمي المناهج والمواد الدراسية بالإضافة إلى ملعي الفصول الدراسية ويساهم تحليل الأخطاء بشكل كبير في تحسين تعلم اللغة وعمليات التدريسيها.

Introduction:

As a teacher of English, I noticed that a lot of students learning English as a second language commit errors of various types. This is one of the reasons that derive me to write this paper on error analysis. The fact that Arabic is entirely different from English in many respects it is not surprising that Arab learners of English face difficulty when learning English and consequently commit errors when confronted with a writing task.

At one point in time when the field of language teaching was dominated by grammar translation method, and the audio-lingual method, errors were viewed by teachers as a sign of failure on the part

of the learner and are not permitted by all means. Such a trend, however, does not last longer. The emergence of transformational generative theory in linguistics has led to a major shift in the field of error analysis as well as in the field of language teaching methodology as Chiang pointed (1981) out {4}.

Richards (1974) {13} states that in the process of second language learning errors can be considered as strategies the learner uses in order to learn. Error analysis then can be utilized to help the learner how to learn the language effectively. In relation to this context Corder (1974) {1} states that errors can tell us a lot about the learner's

*Corresponding author:

E-mail addresses: sal.massoud@sebhau.edu.ly

state of mastering a second language. Errors then are better be analyzed to help the learner to overcome the problems that face him in the process of language learning and encourage him to get a good command of the target language. This paper deals with the following issues; a brief review of the literature on error analysis, outlines and description of the methodological guidelines adopted, data analysis and discussion of the findings.

Definition of Errors:

First of all a distinction between errors and mistakes must be made clear. Errors normally cause communication breakdown at the level of both spoken and written discourse and are likely to lead to misunderstanding. The occurrence of errors is often understood as a clear indication of lack of command of the language on the part of the learner. Mistakes, however, do not cause communication breakdown and can be corrected by the learner himself in most cases, in the process of learning the target language.

Ellis (1996) {6} draws a distinction between two types of errors i.e. covert and overt. He defines covert errors as grammatically correct but not interpretable within the context of communication whereas overt errors are obviously ungrammatical utterances that will lead to misunderstanding. In relation to this context, Morris (1987) {10} emphasizes that an error is a systematic deviation occurs when the learner has not learned a language item, such as a certain linguistic structure, and consistently gets it wrong. An error is also defined by Richard, J. C & Schmidt (2002: 184){15} as "the use of a language in a way which a native speaker of the language regards as faulty or incomplete learning". Having presented some definitions of errors, we will move on to discuss some of the advantages of errors for those involved in language teaching and learning.

The importance of error analysis:

Error analysis is of vital importance for second language teaching and learning. One reason is that the errors committed by second language learners can be considered an indication that shows how well the learner masters the language items taught. The errors and mistakes committed also give us an idea about the strategies the learner uses in order to learn the target language. The errors committed can also reflect the difficult aspects of the language taught and accordingly the teacher can put emphasis upon such aspects and think of ways to help the learners to overcome them. The teacher can also improve the techniques and the strategies he exploits in language teaching. By focusing on the errors committed, language teachers can suggest techniques of dealing with errors inside the classroom environment. Crystal as cited in Hasyim (2002:43) {7} suggests that "error analysis is a technique for identifying, classifying, and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language". According to Kroll and Schafer (1987) {9} error analysis can be considered one of the means of improving writing skill. That is, when identifying the points of failure, those involved in language teaching can focus on them and consider them as means to help them to solve the learner's problems in writing. Consequently, remedial programs can be designed to help learners to overcome the problems they face in a writing task. One more advantage of error analysis is that it gives the learner a feedback that serves as an indicator showing him how close he is from the target language system. Error analysis then can be considered the mirror that reflects the learner's ability of mastering the target language. The errors committed by learners are one of the means that help to trigger feedback from the teacher which can be either positive or negative depending on the learner's contribution. The teacher's positive feedback directed to the learner is likely to encourage him to produce language and this is vital as far as the process of language learning is concerned. One of the merits of error analysis according to Corder (1967) {2} is that it could provide evidence on how language is learned. It also gives access to specialists involved in learning and teaching language to be aware of the strategies exploited by the

learner in the process of language learning.

Classification of errors:

In order to deal with errors, specialists in error analysis classify errors into various types. For example, one type of errors is termed as interlingual. This type occurs as a result of the influence of the learner's first language on the target language in the course of learning. Second language learner in such case generalizes his first language rule system, and pragmatics to the target language. Such generalization as we will see later can be considered one of the main reasons that contribute substantially in the occurrence of various types of errors.

Determining a model of error classification does not seem to be an easy task for a researcher dealing with error analysis. One reason is that various models of error classification have been suggested by specialists in the field. It is the task of the researcher then to decide upon the appropriate model that suits his topic of research. One more problem that may face the researcher is that there is always an overlap of categories under which errors can be classified.

Not all the errors committed by second language learners, however, are attributed to the lack of competence. Errors may occur, particularly in writing, as a result of fatigue and carelessness as Norrish (1987) {10} stressed. Such type of errors is likely to cause problems as far as classification of errors is concerned. Errors that occur as a result of lack of competence, however, can be easily classified and this in turn could help to facilitate the task of analysis. Whatever the source of errors committed, some teachers believe that ignoring them may result in undesirable consequences upon the learners. Such a view is based on the audio-lingual methodological approach of language teaching. Correcting every error committed by the learner, however, is likely to hinder his progress in language learning. As far as spoken language is concerned, discourse analysts recommend that mistakes that do not cause breakdown of communication better be ignored for the sake of developing the learner's oral skills.

Sources of error occurrence:

The language system represented by grammar differs from one language to another. Similar to any human being, a second language learner has a built in linguistic system which enables him to produce and understand language unconsciously as Chomsky (1965) {3} stressed. When the learner is confronted with the task of learning a second language his L1 linguistic system as pointed out earlier in this research paper is likely to interfere with the L2 linguistic system and this interference normally has an impact upon learning a second language and can be the reason behind the occurrence of some systematic errors. SL learners normally form a hypotheses when they learn a second language and in doing so they depend on their built in linguistic system. This can also be considered a reason behind the errors that crop up when learning a second language. When the learner is involved in learning a second language as Dulay et al (1982) {5} state, he constructs a system and exploits it to produce and understand the target language. This system differs from the system of his first language and that of the language he is learning. The system formed by the learner can be considered a fertile area of error analysis. In relation to this context, Chiang (1981) {4} stresses that the occurrence of errors in the process of second language learning indicates that the learner is involved in constructing his own system to learn the target language. This system is used, by the learner as a bridge to cross to the system of the target language.

Another reason behind the occurrence of some errors is the complexity of the target language system. The learner in such case may find it difficult to cope with this system and overcome the problems that face him. This in turn makes him commit errors of various types. One more source of errors can be attributed to the strategies adopted by SL learners. In this connection, Richards and Schmidt (2002) {15} state that some of SL learners' errors can be

attributed to the patterns browsed from the learner's L1. Nunan (2001) {12} also holds the view that the difference between sl and L1 grammatical structures can be considered one of the sources of error occurrence.

Richards (1974) {13} identifies various types of errors committed by sl learners. For instance, over generalization where the learner considers the past tense forms of regular and irregular verb are the same. Another source, in his view, is the ignorance of restrictions where the second language learner does not abide by sl rules and consequently commit errors because of his attempts to resort to simplification. Lack of command of the cohesive ties can also be another source of error occurrence. Such a problem is likely to make the learner unable to write meaningful cohesive paragraph that can be understood by the reader.

As far as writing tasks are concerned, whatever type of error occurs in the process of SI learning must be taken into consideration by classroom teachers. One reason is that correcting errors is likely to place the learner on the right track and enhance the learner's progress in language learning. According to Corder (1967) {2} when errors are dealt with in the class by the teacher, the feedback the learner gets could be either positive or negative. Positive feedback is likely to encourage the learner and encourage him to proceed. Negative feedback on the other hand is likely to discourage learners and may lead them to quit learning all together. In view of this, when correcting errors in class, the teacher should be aware of the side effects inflicted by the type of feedback and think of the appropriate strategies of correcting errors.

As stated above errors have various sources. Selinker (1974) {17} reports the following sources of errors; language transfer, strategies of second language communication, and strategies of second language learning. Corder (1974) {1} also stressed that there are three sources of errors. The first is language transfer which is normally results from the interference of L1. The learner in such case resorts to his mother tongue linguistic system whenever he encounters a problem in the course of SL learning. The second is interlingual interference which normally results in over generalizations, ignorance of restrictions as well as incomplete application of rules. One more source of error occurrence results from the false conceptions formed by second language learners which can be attributed to the lack of command of the target language on the part of the learner. James (1998) also identifies two sources for errors. The first is termed as Interlingual interference and the second as intralingual interference. The former takes place when there is similarity or difference between the learner's L1 and the target language. Meanwhile the latter is closely related to the learning strategies adopted by the learner such as false analogy and incomplete rule application.

Advantages of error analysis:

Errors committed by SL learners seem to have pedagogical implications which can be utilized by those involved in the field of language teaching and learning. For instance, positive transfer errors that occur as a result of similarities between the learner's L1 and the SL are likely to help SL learners to overcome problems related to language learning. A case in point is the linguistic aspects of similarity between French and Spanish help French learners of Spanish as a second language to learn this language effectively. The aspects of similarity between German and English also help German learners of English as a second language to overcome problems related learning this language.

Error analysis is also advantageous to syllabus as well as material designers as it serves as an indicator to help them to determine the appropriate needs of learners and accordingly can set the basis for individualized instruction and self-learning. Moreover, the errors committed by SL learners could give specialists in the field of language teaching a clue about the strategies utilized by learners to

learn Sl.

Methodology and Data:

1- Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this research paper is based on Corder (1967) {2} views on error analysis. In order to describe and analyze learners' errors, erroneous sentences will be copied and reconstructed in view of their correct counterparts in the target language. The two sentences then are compared so that the errors committed will be identified. Having identified the error, the following stage of our model of analysis is classifying the errors located and finally the error will be analyzed and the reasons for their occurrence will be stated.

Before starting the stage of description and analysis, the type of sentence in which the error crops up will be categorized either covert or overt. An overt sentence is completely ungrammatical because the restrictions of word order are violated. Meanwhile an overt sentence is well-formed in grammatical terms but ill-formed in semantic terms. It is meaningless in the context in which it occurs.

The error categories that are dealt with in this paper are grammatical, lexical, errors related to word order and overgeneralizations as well as misuse of articles and prepositions.

2- Data

Thirty students volunteer to take part as participants in this study. They are second semester students of English department in the faculty of education. Participants are asked to write a composition about the college building. Seven pieces of compositions are chosen randomly out of thirty for analysis. The time allowed to complete the writing task is 45 minutes. Factors like age, academic standard and background knowledge in English are taken into consideration. One reason is that we believe that such factors influence the participant's ability of performance. Because of this, the participants chosen studied English as second language as one of the school subjects right from grade five in primary school.

Data Analysis:

This section of the research paper deals with the analysis and description of the sample of data selected. As pointed out in the section of our methodological guidelines, the original sentence in which the error occurs is cited, reconstructed correctly and finally described and analyzed.

Original sentence 1

The college divided in to three sections'.

Reconstructed sentence:

The college is divided into three sections.

The errors committed are deleting verb to be 'is' and splitting the preposition 'into' to become two words instead of one..

The first error can be attributed to the fact that the learner's L1 system is different from that of the target language. If the sentence in question is translated into Arabic, we can notice that verb to be does not exist in the translated sentence. The second mistake committed by the learner is splitting the preposition 'into' into two parts which implies that the learner is not aware of the fact that this preposition in English is one word. This error can also be attributed to the learner's L1 interference, because such form of the preposition has no equivalent in Arabic.

Original sentence 2

The second section consists the classes, and cafeteria, and recording office and English top'.

Reconstructed sentence:

The second section consists of the classrooms, the cafeteria, the registration office, and English department at the top.

The errors committed are deleting the preposition 'of', wrong insertion of the coordinating conjunction 'and' and improper use of

lexical items.

Deleting the preposition 'of' might be attributed to the fact that the preposition in the learner's L1 that can be used in the same context is entirely different from the preposition 'of' in form and function. This can be considered the reason of deleting it all together. The wrong insertion of the coordinating conjunction 'and' can be attributed to the fact that in the learner's L1 the coordinating conjunction 'wa' 'and' is inserted whenever a lexical item is added to the sentence. In English, however, the comma is used to function as a conjunction and the coordinating conjunction 'and' appears before the final lexical item added to fulfill a syntactic function in the sentence in which it occurs. The final error committed by the learner, in the sentence in question is a lexical error. He using the phrase 'recording office' instead of 'registration office' which can be attributed to the poor background of the learner in this respect.

Original sentence 3

'The third section is the hostel where the students can stay in it while they are studying at the college'.

Reconstructed sentence:

The third section is the hostel where the students stay throughout the period of study.

The errors committed are unnecessary use of the phrase 'in it', misuse of the word 'while' and improper use of the auxiliary verb 'can'.

The learner uses the phrase 'in it' assuming that it has an important role in the sentence. But the fact of the matter is that the meaning of the sentence is clear and so the learner can do without. The reason behind this error is that the learner seems to resorts to his L1 linguistic background and accordingly adopts a planning strategy based on his background to use the phrase assuming that it is essential in this context as the case in Arabic. The second error committed by the learner is misusing the adverb of time 'while'. Such an error can also be attributed to the planning strategy of the learner to overgeneralize L2 rule for the sake of simplification. The third error committed by the learner is the use of the auxiliary verb 'can' in the wrong context. This verb has no obvious grammatical role in the sentence as shown in the reconstructed sentence. Such an error might be attributed to the limited background of the learner concerning the linguistic system of the target language.

Original sentence 4:

'University sitre it have two buildings comprises many of departments'.

Reconstructed sentence:

The college has two buildings which include many departments.

Errors committed are misuse of verb 'to have', deleting the definite article 'the' and misuse of the preposition 'of'.

The first error committed by the learner is that the word 'college' is substituted by the word university which implies the poor command of lexical items on the part of the learner. The limited background of the learner concerning 'verb to have' has led him to use 'have' instead of 'has'. Deleting the article 'the' is a grammatical error indicates the ignorance of the learner of the target language rule system. Due to the fact that the functional roles played by prepositions overlap in the target language, it is not surprising that the learner uses the preposition 'of' in the wrong context.

Original sentence 5:

'I come at 9:00, because take lectures with my friends thiere are student very a morning and them treatment nice'.

Reconstructed sentence:

I come at 9:00, to attend classes with my friends every morning. Students in the college behave well.

The errors committed are in appropriate use of the word 'because', inappropriate use of the lexical items 'take' and 'lecture', and misuse of the possessive pronoun 'their' as well as the object pronoun 'them'. The first error committed by the learner, in the sentence in question, can be considered a transfer error as the equivalent of the word

'because' in the learner's L1 can be used in this context. The learner seems to use the word 'because' in this context as a strategy to simplify language production. Both the words 'take' and 'lecture' are used inappropriately which reflects the poor background of the learner in this respect. Both the possessive pronoun 'their' and the object pronoun 'them' are wrongly used by the learner in the sentence, in question, which indicates that the learner is not aware of such grammatical categories and the functional role they play in sentence structure.

Original sentence 6:

'My name is Halim, am student in faculty education college, it located in Aljoufra Waddan'.

Reconstructed sentence:

My name is Hlim, I am a student in the faculty of education. It is in Waddan Aljoufra.

Errors committed are deleting the first person singular pronoun 'I', the definite article 'the', and the preposition 'of'. The words 'faculty' and 'college' are used in the same context.

Deleting the first person singular pronoun 'I' indicates that the learner is not aware of the syntactic restrictions of the target language and the absence of the definite article 'the', in the sentence in question, can be considered a transfer error. One reason is that such an article does not exist in the learner's L1 linguistic system in such context. So taking into consideration his L1 background, the learner ignores the functional role performed by the definite article 'the' in the sentence. Omitting verb to be 'is' from the sentence can be attributed to the incomplete application of L2 rule. In relation to this context Richards (1974) {1} points out that some of L2 learner errors are due to incomplete application of the target language rule system. Contrary to English, the passive sentence in Arabic does not include verb to be. This can be one of the reasons behind omitting verb to be from the sentence in question. The learner also uses the words 'college' and 'faculty' in the same context which implies that he is unable to distinguish between these two lexical items. This is likely to lead the learner to experience what Stenson (1974) {16} labels as problems of performance.

Original sentence 7:

'My college is large and there are a lot of students form other places studies here, it has different specializations such as physics and math and English language'.

Reconstructed sentence:

My college is large and there are many students from various cities in it. There are different specializations in the college, such as physics, math, and English language.

The errors committed are wrong verb form of the verb 'to study', the adverb of place 'here' is used improperly to replace the phrase 'in the college' and unnecessary use of the coordinating conjunction 'and'.

The first error occurs as a result of incomplete application of the target language rule. Such an error reflects the fact that the learner is unable to apply subject verb agreement rule that encounters him in the writing task. Lack of command of the target language grammar is likely to lead the learner to be involved in forming false conceptions about L2 rules and consequently makes him commit errors of this kind. As indicated above, the adverb of place 'here' is used by the learner instead of the phrase 'in the college'. Such an error can be classified as a lexical error. In such case the learner seems to resort to what is known in error analysis as planning strategy in order to simplify language production and get the message he wants to convey across. The coordinating conjunction 'and' is wrongly used, in the sentence in question. Such an error can be considered a transfer error as the coordinating conjunction in the learner's L1 is used whenever a lexical item is added to the sentence.

Discussion of results:

The analysis of errors show that some of the errors are performance errors and other are related to the linguistic system of L2 and are

known as performance errors. For instance, verb 'to be' is deleted from some of the passive sentence. Such an error can be considered an evidence of the lack of the grammatical competence of the learner in the target language. It reflects incomplete application of the passive rule of the target language. The fact that the passive sentence structure in Arabic is entirely different from that of English is likely to be the main reason behind the occurrence of such an error. In some of the sentences of our data prepositions are used improperly in wrong contexts. As second language learners, it is likely to be difficult for our subjects to determine the functional role of prepositions in English. One reason is that such functions depend to a great extent on the context in which the preposition crops up. Unlike Arabic, the functions of prepositions in English overlap. That is a preposition may fulfill the same function in different contexts and more than one preposition could play the same functional role in one particular context.

Our data shows that the learners we are concerned with have some problems in using the coordinating conjunctions 'and'. The main reason behind this problem as stated earlier is the difference between the target language and the learners L1 in this respect. In English the comma plays the grammatical functional role of a coordinating conjunction 'and' but in Arabic the comma does not play such a role. The coordinating conjunction has to be present in form whenever the need arises. The analysis of our data indicates that the definite article 'the' is deleted from some sentences. Such an error implies that learners who commit this error are ignorant of the rule application of such grammatical category. In the learner's L1, the indefinite article has no formal representation in the sentence. Its grammatical functional role is implied by the absence of the definite article. In English, however, both the definite and indefinite articles must be present in form in the context in which they occur. This can be considered a substantial reason behind the occurrence of errors related to such a grammatical category.

Data analysis shows that one of the major problems that encounter our subjects is the inability to deal with subject verb agreement rule. Ignorance of such rule is likely to lead the learner to be involved in forming false conceptions and resorts to simplification for the sake of facilitating language production. Attempts as such are likely to lead the learner to commit errors related to subject verb agreement. The analysis also shows that syntactic restrictions of the target language are violated. Such violation has led the learner to write incoherent meaningless sentences and phrases that influence the general idea of the text negatively.

Concluding remarks:

Error analysis can be considered an important field in applied linguistics. As far as language teaching is concerned it is vital for both teachers and learners. Course and material designer alike benefit from error analysis as it can be used as a tool to help them to determine what are the appropriate needs for the learners? Despite the fact that we have drawn a distinction between errors and mistakes to show the difference between them, our main focus in this research paper was on errors for the following reasons. The first is to restrict the scope of the paper to achieve successful outcome. The second is the substantial impact errors have upon the teaching and the learning process is far more than that of mistakes. There are various models of error analysis outlined and discussed in the literature. The nature of the topic of this paper is the decisive factor in selecting the model adopted.

The results of the study show that the main source of error occurrence is the difference between Arabic, the participants L1, and English the target language. The common errors committed by our subjects are misuse of verb 'to be', prepositions, coordinating conjunction 'and' as well as some lexical items. When learning a second language as Ellis

(1996) {6} states, the learner formulates his own linguistic system, which is different from that of the learner's L1 and the target language. At the stage of applying this system, errors are likely to crop up.

In view of the concluding remarks discussed above, we would like to put forward the following suggestions that we believe could help overcoming some of the problems that may encounter L2 learners in writing tasks. Learners might be given enough writing tasks to do at home. The written work then can be discussed in class so that learners work as a team to find solutions to the problems they face. Learners also may be asked to write pieces of composition inside the class and work in groups so that they can learn from each other and correct errors. Moreover, in order to improve learners' writing skill, writing conventions should be emphasized to improve the learners' writing skills and encourage them to write meaningful cohesive and coherent pieces of composition. Finally, Teachers involved in teaching writing skills may meet and work as a team to discuss the errors committed by learners and suggest ways of eradicating them.

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